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Zimbabweans face hostility in South Africa

by Bronwen Dachs by Catholic News Service

CAPE TOWN, South Africa -- Zimbabweans fleeing politically motivated violence at home often face hostility in South Africa, said Father Chris Townsend, communications officer for the Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference.

"Zimbabweans face enormous stressors on both sides of the border," Father Townsend told Catholic News Service in a telephone interview from Pretoria.

In 2010, the number of refugees seeking church help dropped by half compared to 2008 and 2009, but "now it is increasing rapidly, largely because of intimidation and torture" of President Robert Mugabe's opponents in Zimbabwe, Father Townsend said.

Mugabe's supporters are campaigning for as-yet-unscheduled elections.

Jesuit Father Oskar Wermter, who runs the order's communications office in Harare, told Catholic News Service that incidences of violence are "increasing dangerously" in Zimbabwe.

In what analysts called xenophobic attacks, a group of South Africans in Polokwane stoned to death a Zimbabwean they accused of killing two South Africans in a house robbery; then the South Africans burned houses rented by Zimbabweans.

Mid-June attacks in Limpopo province, which borders Zimbabwe, have put Zimbabweans in South Africa "on high alert, with many people feeling unsafe and intimidated," Father Townsend said.

According to a priest in Makhado, a town in Limpopo, Zimbabweans entering South Africa move swiftly through the province on their way to Johannesburg or Pretoria, "presumably to look for work."

"They used to spend longer in the town," Sacred Heart Father Frank Gallagher, pastor of Queen of Peace Parish in Makhado, told CNS.

Father Gallagher's parish distributes soup and bread to Zimbabweans who sleep in a field at the side of the town's main road that leads to Johannesburg, 400 miles to the southwest. He also runs a home for 16 boys who, unaccompanied by adults, crossed Zimbabwe's border into South Africa.

In a pastoral letter read in churches around South Africa June 19, the Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference urged South Africans to support refugees.

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"We urge you, as followers of Christ, to oppose the evil of xenophobia threatening to divide the community of human beings," the bishops said.

"Each person should do whatever he or she can to unite against this wickedness of xenophobia and endeavor to build communities of love," they said.

"As refugees and other displaced people continue to experience lack of love and suffer injustices, we implore you to create communities that imitate the most Holy Trinity, reciprocating love and compassion," the bishops said.

As well as xenophobic attacks on Zimbabweans, the church is "very concerned about the gangs" at the border that rape and steal from Zimbabweans as they make their way into South Africa across the Limpopo River and through the African bush, Father Townsend said.

Bishop Kevin Dowling of Rustenburg, a member of the Solidarity Peace Trust, an ecumenical group of South Africans and Zimbabweans, said that "severe poverty in South Africa, the lack of jobs among young people and general hopelessness are a volatile cocktail" that could help explain the xenophobic attacks.

He said elections in Zimbabwe should be held only when the terms of the agreement that led to Zimbabwe's unity government have been met. The unity government formed in 2009 after violence-plagued elections in 2008.

"To hold elections in a vacuum, without a new constitution, is a recipe for further problems," Bishop Dowling said in a telephone interview from Rustenburg.

Civil society in Zimbabwe needs to be "fully part of the constitution-making process, and the Southern African Development Community must not let anything derail the terms of the agreement, which forms the foundation for free and fair elections," he said.

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